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## **Ecospirituality and sustainability transitions: agency towards degrowth**

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## **Abstract**

‘Sustainability transitions’ has emerged as one of the most important and influential literatures on understanding the pathways towards a more sustainable future. Yet, most approaches in this literature privilege technological and regime-wide innovations, while people’s agencies, grassroots innovations, and social factors more generally are often underrepresented. This article focuses on the role of ecospirituality as worldview, aiming to understand how spiritual and religious beliefs play an important role in practical, everyday sustainability transitions. In an extensive desk-based study, literature across disciplines is reviewed to explore connections between spirituality, pro-environmental behaviour, climate policy, and sustainability agencies. Showing the importance of ecospiritual practice, the purpose of this article is to make a case for the inclusion of ecospirituality, as worldview, in the study of sustainability transitions. We argue that ecospirituality is a significant dimension to understanding people’s contemporary agencies that shift away from endless economic growth and resource efficiency mantras towards more radical worldviews of degrowth and different ways of achieving happiness and fulfilment in life.

Keywords: ecospirituality; human agency; sustainability transitions; degrowth; belief

## **Introduction**

Across the world people are becoming increasingly aware of the immense ecological challenges faced by this planet. In September 2019 ordinary people – led by school children – gathered in their millions in the towns and cities of the world to call for urgent climate change action (Singh et al. 2019). In the UK, many local government authorities, universities, and other institutions have declared ecological and climate change emergencies (climateemergency.uk 2019). Films and speeches by David Attenborough and others have raised the awareness of ecological issues to unprecedented levels, and many polls now suggest that climate change is amongst the top five concerns for people in many

countries (e.g. IPSOS 2019).

In response to these increasingly desperate calls for climate action, governments, corporations but also many civil society organisations often rely on technological solutions, such as carbon capture and storage, geo-engineering, electric cars, energy smart meters, public transport systems, biofuels, to name just a few (e.g. Lomborg 2010). Scholars contributing to the so-called ‘sustainability transitions’ literature, too, are mostly concerned with ‘unlocking’ or ‘opening up’ sociotechnical regimes, often assuming that contemporary beliefs in endless economic growth can be maintained if low-carbon technologies can be adopted at the appropriate regime-wide scale (e.g. Grin, Rotmans and Schot 2010, 331; Seyfang et al. 2013, 3; Wittmayer et al. 2016, 10).

However, scholars acknowledge that technology alone cannot bring about the sustainability transition required to address the ecological challenges of this planet (e.g. Seyfang 2009; 2010). Understanding human behaviours and everyday practices as well as appreciating how communities and social movements bring about system change from the bottom-up have become focal points for many scholars concerned with sustainability (Shove 2003; Seyfang et al. 2013; Ikerd 2016b). These contributions aim to study the concrete sustainability practices people are engaged with on a daily basis, understanding their values and belief systems, which are often opposed to the ‘growth’ logic of dominant economic frames.

What is often missing in these debates on sustainability practices is a consideration of spirituality and religion, which is curious, given that most people on this planet consider themselves to be connected to, or influenced by, some form of spiritual or religious belief system (e.g. in the United States: Pew Research, 2016). Hence, the main purpose of this article is to locate the role of spirituality in the sustainability transitions framework, which has been one of the most influential sustainability literatures (Genus and Coles 2008; Grin, Rotmans and Schot 2010; Geels 2011; Markard, Raven and Truffer 2012). We will focus on ‘ecospiritual’ practices and their philosophical underpinnings, making a case for the inclusion of ecospiritual agency – as worldview – in the sustainability transition debates. Discussing ecology from a spiritual perspective is, of course, not new. This has been a theme for writers, scholars, and philosophers for centuries, and increasingly addressed during the emergence of

the modern environmental movement in the 1960s (Eckersley 1992, 11). Writing in 1967, Lynn White attempted to uncover the ‘historical roots of our ecologic crises’ with a special focus on western science and religion, making a call for an ‘alternative Christian view’ (White 1967, 1203–1207). ‘Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious’, White writes, ‘the remedy must also be essentially religious; whether we call it that or not’ (1967, 1207). White’s thesis influenced a broad array of theoretical discussions and awareness-making campaigns particularly in the major faith religions (Koehrsen 2017, 5).

In the past few decades academic and research institutions have been established, especially but not exclusively in the West, for the interconnected study of ecology and religion. An increasing number of publications testify to the apparent mobilisation of religious thought and institutions, including the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor 2005, 2008), which has made an invaluable contribution with numerous academically detailed entries in two lengthy volumes. What is apparent in these debates is that ‘religion can be a critical factor for transitions towards more environmentally friendly societies. In particular, they point to the need for visions and moral attitudes that mobilize people for rendering societies more sustainable. While science, technology, and politics lack this capacity, religion appears to be a highly suitable candidate for filling this gap’ (Koehrsen 2017, 5).

At the same time, however, and this is Koehrsen’s (2017) warning, too, one must be careful not to idealise spirituality and religion by default. Clearly, religious and spiritual talk and walk may serve to inhibit sustainability transitions. While religious greening, theoretical postulations and institutional endeavours abound in many contemporary forms, the focus of this article is to show how an ecospiritual worldview may influence environmental, degrowth, and low-carbon agendas through practice rather than mere theorising. We argue that ecospirituality is an angle that is invaluable yet often forgotten in the sustainability transition literature, providing vital insights for understanding people’s everyday agency in their sustainability practices.

### **Spirituality and ecology**

It has long been debated what religion and spirituality exactly stand for and how they relate to each other. Pargament et al. (2013, 14) define spirituality as ‘the search for the sacred’ while religion is ‘the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality’ (15). In the introductory entry of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Taylor (2005) provides a detailed description of the perceptions and connections of religion and spirituality by referencing seminal theoretical works as well as survey studies (Roof 1993, 76–77; Helminiak 1996, 33; Zinnbauer et al. 1997, 563). Summarised by Taylor, the basic claim of this literature is that, while religiosity conveys institutional connotations, spirituality is more subjective and empowering. ‘But there are additional idea clusters that often are more closely associated with spirituality than religion’, the author adds, ‘and these ideas tend to be closely connected with nature and a sense of its value and sacredness’ (Taylor 2005, ix). This tendency to appreciate and reverence nature is a key attribute of the spirituality – institutional or not – addressed in this article.

While narrowing the term ‘spirituality’ to ‘ecospirituality’ is helpful, it does not define a homogeneous community which could be exclusively called ecospiritual. On the contrary, ecospirituality is a very broad phrase used to address a wide variety of ecological theory and practice, including witchcraft and sexuality (e.g. Taylor 2005, 2008, 2019). In his book, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, Taylor (2010) identifies several diverse and at times eccentric communities that endeavour to save the planet on grounds of their spiritual beliefs. At the opposite end, of course, we may find spiritualities like the ‘prosperity gospel’ that manifest little or no interest in environmental attitudes or behaviours.

While philosophically rooted in ‘deep ecology’, discussed below, it is important to note that ecospirituality puts first and foremost emphasis on practical achievements, such as pro-environmental and climate change mitigation actions. Various bodies of literature also refer to this ecospirituality as biospirituality, stressing the practical, lifestyle-related qualities represented by specific spiritualities and communities of practice that fall into the pro-environmental category (e.g. Nath 2010). Research in the field often focuses on institutional religiosity, studying the life of religious organisations within (but not exclusively) the Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim faiths (e.g. Mohamad, Idris

and Mamat 2012; Cherry 2013; Vinkhuyzen and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2014; Lestar 2018). Apart from formal religiosity, however, there is a significant movement of a non-religious ecospirituality, also referred to as contemporary spirituality (Witt 2011; 2012), which some scholars claim is growing (Houtman and Mascini 2002; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007).

Following Witt (2011; 2012), we discuss ecospirituality as a pro-environmental worldview. Koltko-Rivera (2004, 5) defines worldviews as foundational assumptions ‘regarding the underlying nature of reality, [...] social relations or guidelines for living’. Worldviews, in short, ‘are sets of beliefs and assumptions that describe reality’. Koltko-Rivera relates worldview to ‘personality traits, motivation, affect, cognition, behavior, and culture’ (2004, 3), all of which are key factors in studying worldviews and their relation to social phenomena. In their study Witt, Boer and Boersema (2014) categorise worldviews as intrinsically or extrinsically oriented. They find that, while spiritual worldviews tend to be more intrinsically oriented (e.g. ‘inner growth’) and correlate with pro-environmental behaviours, materialistic worldviews are more extrinsically centred (e.g. ‘focus on money’) and less pro-environmental. While further worldview categorisations are possible (e.g. modern, postmodern; religious, non-religious; human-centred, Earth-centred), the point to stress is that the ‘foundational assumptions’ and ‘beliefs’ they relate to may correspond to lifestyle practices pro and contra sustainability (see also Koltko-Rivera 2004, 24).

An ecospiritual worldview, then, is nurtured by beliefs and ethical views which lead to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. As noted earlier, naturally, the ecospirituality of specific religious or spiritual groups may starkly oppose each other in terms of ecological commitment. Despite differences, however, common in a dispersed body of literature focusing on ecospirituality is a recognition of environmentally significant behaviours. Often captured by research in specific community settings, ecospiritual practice is described by the following major lifestyle attributes:

1. Vegetarianism (Carroll 2004, 95; Nath 2010; Lestar 2017)
2. Close connectivity with nature and all other beings (Carroll 2004, 50; Witt 2011, 1059; Jackson 2009, 150)
3. Simplicity and frugality (Jackson 2009, 151; Lestar 2018)

4. Sharing and serving (of property, finances, land, food, etc.) (Carroll 2004, 54)
5. Creativity and meaningful manual labour (Carroll 2004)

While these practices are not exclusive to spiritual eco-communities, they are manifested differently in their midst in that the spiritual beliefs and teachings serve as additional lifestyle motivators for sustainability (Wenell 2016, 34), an argument that alone provides significant reasons for explaining the potential role of ecospiritual groups in transitions towards sustainability.

In what comes next, we use examples from the social scientific literature to briefly illustrate how pro-environmental attitudes are manifested by ecospirituality through the central concept of interconnectedness in nature. The purpose here is not to homogenise a broad range of philosophies and blur their distinct features, but rather, to identify some commonalities that make spirituality a significant subject for sustainability transitions research. Apart from non-religious spirituality, a wide array of ecospiritualities is foregrounded in supporting bodies of literature, representing various forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and religions like the Parsee or the Bahá'í (e.g. Carroll 2004; Zsolnay 2015; Wenell 2016). Instead of focusing on the differences and particularities of each of these cases, we locate some of the distinctive philosophies that motivate spiritual adherents to cultivate environmentally significant behaviours.

### ***Ecospirituality and environmentally significant behaviours***

First and foremost, in many variants of ecospirituality there is an explicitly held view of the Earth as a space designed for the happiness of every living being, humans and nonhumans alike. Also referred to as 'creation spirituality' in a Christian context (Carroll 2004, 95), this affectionate view of nature and the Earth promotes a compassionate attitude often reflected in dietary preferences and an intimate, caring relation to nature (Carroll's work is focused on North American Catholic communities such as Sisters of Earth). A cognate view of 'nature sacredness' is also reflected in the practices of some Eastern beliefs and practices which build upon the notion of interconnectedness among all living elements of the world. Again, in the context of Christianity, the concepts of intimacy often go beyond general veneration and even stewardship (Carroll 2004, 50), this caring relation is at times echoed in

practices that are salient for ecological and sustainability literatures. The long-held traditional understanding of human 'dominion' in controlling animals is challenged and reversed (Scully 2003), which in some cases contributes to and/or calls for dietary change (Barclay 2010; Nath 2014).

Obviously, the level and character of intimacy and stewardship will differ from faith to faith, and for non-God-centred views the Earth may be conceptualised differently. However, a practical compassion towards all beings appears to be a common characteristic of most ecospiritual groups. The dietary consequence of this philosophy cannot be overemphasised at a time when food is claimed to be one of the most important factors in potential transitional trajectories, while also highly under-researched in the sustainability transitions literature (Markard, Raven and Truffer 2012, 961).

Yet, vegetarianism is not the only fruit of ecospiritual thinking. Ecospirituality as lived experience is claimed to improve ecological and food literacy (Carroll 2004, 81), to create conducive environments for creative, versatile and fulfilling labour (Carroll 2004, 63, 101, 110, 150), and to encourage sharing activities and serving (Carroll 2004, 54) – to name but a few alternatives to the widely problematised value systems and behaviours of our day (e.g. materialism, instrumentalism, consumerism, capitalism, etc.).

At the same time, spirituality – and its religious forms in particular – is often critiqued for its potential tendencies for counter-cultural attitudes which may make it indigestible for wider segments of society (Lasch 1978, 4; Taylor 1999, 508). One major point of criticism lies in the perception of most if not all major religions as profoundly patriarchal in attitude and practice, leaving little room for self-expression and participation of women in decision-making. Eastern religions provide prime targets for emphasising gender imbalance (e.g. Rochford 1982; 1985; 2007; Palmer 2004).

Yet, in the face of potentially inhibiting factors, it is still possible to outline traits of pro-environmental significance which are distinctly spiritual in character. In what follows, we turn to the tenets of deep ecology and cognate teachings to exemplify how a 'meta-economics' (Schumacher 1973, 42) as an alternative option to growth-based development is viewed and brought to the fore in a variety of disciplines and spiritual discourses.



### ***Deep ecology and degrowth***

A spiritually imbued connectivity with nature is reflected by the philosophical concepts of deep ecology, some of which are commonly shared by some modern forms of Eastern religions (e.g. Hare Krishna), the contemporary spirituality of the New Age movements, and a few minority groups and eco-communities within Christianity (e.g. Sisters of Earth movement). Deep ecology teaches the need for a deep consciousness concerning the self and all other natural beings. This proposed consciousness and the basic tenet that all beings in nature are connected and interconnected to form a cohort of equal beings, carry high spiritual connotations, and so does the overall character of this philosophy, even if its religiosity is not made explicit. The term deep ecology derives from the work of Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1995) who used the metaphor of a deep ecological tree to express by it ‘a tree with long and strong roots and different branches consisting of ideas from Hinduism, Confucius and Buddha on the one hand, and Aristotle, Heidegger and Spinoza on the other’ (Ims 2015, 48).

As Ims (2015) explains, deep ecology is opposed to shallow ecology, which is focused on treating symptoms and inventing technological fixes to environmental problems. In contrast, the ‘deep’ in deep ecology radically questions the anthropocentric worldview and requires a non-reductionist approach that gets to the roots of problems. A realisation of these roots, according to Næss’ philosophy, is made possible through an understanding of the self. An entire transformation is needed in viewing what self means and how it can be turned into an eco-Self (Ims 2015, 49). Such an eco-Self is then able to question the ability of dominant values and sociocultural institutions to adequately address ecological concerns. This calling into question of systems of provision and infrastructure is of special interest for the sustainability transitions literature, which often claims a so-called ‘second-order learning’ to be a recognisable characteristic of successful niche formations (e.g. Seyfang 2008, 71). Second-order learning reaches beyond conventional learning in that it problematises set values that are taken for granted in mainstream practice.

In deep ecology, through a new experience or recognition, a network of relationships (*gestalt*) is perceived, which leads to ‘a strong sense of wide identification, an increased sense of empathy and a natural inclination to protect non-human life’ (Ims 2015, 52). This identification with the rest of nature

results in a happiness that cannot originate from a thoughtless consumption of material goods (see also Jackson 2009, 151). Instead, deep ecology advocates for a Buddhist economics, representing a ‘middle way’ (Im 2015, 52) in terms of avoiding both the extremes of self-indulgence and sensuality on the one hand, and asceticism on the other.

The tenets of deep ecology aptly exemplify how a variety of ecospiritualities regard nature and all existent beings. Yet, it is not the only philosophy that calls for an entire shift in worldviews. In the 1970s Christian and Buddhist ethics were foregrounded by Schumacher (1973, 44–51) to challenge the economic system built upon the notion of continuous growth. His approach, put forward in the book *Small is Beautiful; Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), may be regarded as one of the forerunners of today’s ‘degrowth’ movements (D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2014; Heikkurinen 2016), ‘New Economics’ (Seyfang 2009) or ‘deep sustainability management’ (Ikerd, Gamble and Cox 2014; Ikerd 2016a).

Though not necessarily or explicitly on spiritual grounds, these social and academic initiatives – together with Jackson’s *Prosperity Without Growth* (2009) – call into question the entire economic system presently regulating the world. What is proposed is a radical shift from big to small, from technical to natural, from greed to need, from complicated to simple, and so forth. The dominant view of resource efficiency and management is replaced by notions of prosperity through consuming less by simplifying life, sharing, local initiatives, and more. To Schumacher, in line with the tenets of deep ecology, this proposed systemic change can only happen through a preceding shift from materialist to spiritual worldviews. In his proposal to ‘scrap economics and start afresh’ (1974, 62) he writes:

Since there is now increasing evidence of environmental deterioration, particularly in living nature, the entire outlook and methodology of economics is being called into question. The study of economics is too narrow and too fragmentary to lead to valid insights, unless complemented and completed by a study of meta-economics. (Schumacher 1974, 42)

By meta-economics Schumacher means a social and economic system which is ‘philosophically’ and ‘religiously’ changed (1974, 96). The representatives of deep sustainability management (e.g. Ikerd 2016a; 2016b) occupy the same position today as Schumacher (and Lynn White) half a century ago, proposing that a spiritual turn is necessary to solve society’s problems including climate change. Not

necessarily or explicitly on a spiritual basis, several other authors are critical of the idea that systemic change can occur through technological innovations and market-based solutions (e.g. Grin, Rotmans and Schot 2010, 331; Seyfang et al. 2013, 3). Scholars questioning economic growth as a measure for development emphasise the importance of simplifying lifestyle related practice rather than improving resource management at the regime level (Seyfang 2009; Jackson 2009; Ikerd 2016a). They exclude the possibility of transition through incremental adjustments made to the current system. What they advocate is a completely new economics, the ‘economics of tomorrow’ (Jackson 2016), which is not based on the unlimited growth of production and the insatiable desires of consumers.

While sustainability transitions scholars also tend to posit the necessity of dislodging and disrupting systems of provision, what they corporately imply is a ‘clean-tech’ infrastructure, where the regimes of provision become carbon-neutral as far as possible. This difference in viewpoint reflects disparities in ontological understanding, as ontological assumptions on agency-related concepts influence the occurrence of subject matters (e.g. energy, transport, food, lifestyle) within the sustainability transitions field. To understand how spirituality is presently treated in the literature, we need to examine how the social aspects of systemic transitions are conceptualised in sustainability transitions studies.

### ***The social aspects of sustainability transitions***

Most authors writing in the sustainability transitions literature frame change as mainly sociotechnical co-evolutions of numerous interrelated and interdependent factors. As a central concept, niches of innovation – initially often simply referred to as technological niches – are experimental places (of communities), inherently striving to overthrow the wider regimes of provisions. Although the multiplicity of causes is emphasised, the topic of human agency is less considered (for an early example: Smith, Stirling and Berkhout 2005), while – according to frequent critiques – the mediatory role of technological innovations is given central stage (e.g. Grin, Rotmans and Schot 2010, 331; Seyfang et al. 2013, 3).

Another line of criticism has directly targeted the issue of missing agency within the literature. Smith,

Stirling, and Berkhout (2005, 1492) find it ‘too descriptive and structural, leaving room for greater analysis of agency’. Genus and Coles (2008, 1441) raise similar points and propose that sustainability transition frameworks should incorporate constructivist approaches (e.g. actor-network theory) to ‘show concern for actors and alternative representations that could otherwise remain silent’. This is in accordance with Seyfang’s suggestions about the social extension of a heavily market- and technology-based framework. Others, during the development of the framework, have argued for ‘the potential to carve out the “social” in socio-technical transitions’ (e.g. Wittmayer et al. 2016, 10).

In recognition of the perceived inefficiency of resource management and provision-side improvements to combat climate change, scholars of sustainability transitions have hence begun to focus their enquiries on the social world. As an early example of ‘social extension’, Seyfang and Haxeltine (2008, 2) evaluate the upscaling potential of the Transition Towns movement in the UK. Their empirical findings – in line with other studies (Shove 2004; Ropke 1999; Jackson 2007; 2009; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2008) – suggest that involving people is more effective in terms of working towards change than linear cognitive models (e.g. persuasion-based communication). This is because involvement offers both psychological solutions (e.g. belonging and recognition) and immediate benefits (e.g. savings, community, pleasure). Their interviewees suggest that participatory activities like community gardening will do more to ‘percolate the word out’ through doing rather than ‘focusing on awareness-raising’ (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2008, 393; see also Bharucha et al. 2019).

Elsewhere, Seyfang et al. (2013, 4) call for the recognition of grassroots innovations as an important social aspect of how sustainability transitions come about in communities. They stress the importance of collective consumption-side aspects over production and provisioning in singular regimes (e.g. the energy sector). Drawing on new social movement theories, Seyfang et al. (2013) explain the ongoing crisis of modernity and capitalist societies by a set of societal factors where the ‘environmental crisis is just one symptom of many that affect processes of identity formation [...] and social cohesion’ (10). Thus, instead of merely treating environmental sustainability as a solitary issue, the authors suggest that a wider range of social factors are brought into analyses of sustainability transitions. Central to this argument is a shift in focus not only from technology to the social, but also from systems of

distribution to end-user behaviour and lifestyle. Here, what is of particular importance are experimental innovations based on simplicity and sharing, which for Seyfang (2009; 2010), point to entirely 'new economics'.

Other transitions theorists have also expanded their interest towards the inclusion of less visible social agents into their analyses (Markard, Raven and Truffer 2012; Avelino and Wittmayer 2015). Despite ongoing processes of additions and modifications, however, the full spectrum of social analyses is still missing in the sustainability transitions framework. For example, questions of beliefs and worldview have – apart from the work of Koehrsen (2017) and a few case studies – hardly been addressed. In the following section we demonstrate how spirituality has been treated so far, and argue for more space for it in the sustainability transitions literature.

### **Spirituality in the sustainability transitions literature**

Sustainability transitions frameworks conceptualise communities as experimental niches to test out innovative practices which, analysed and evaluated, can provide insights for policymakers and other stakeholders. Although the theme of spirituality and spiritual/religious communities is not expressly considered, initial endeavours have been made to explore connections between religious groups and environmentally significant behaviour (Mohamad, Idris and Mamat 2012; Vinkhuyzen and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2014; Cherry 2013). Often, these explorations lack empirical depth as they are mostly grounded on small-scale case studies or desk-based theorising. This is most surprising, as the broader literature on sustainability has amply documented the significance of spirituality for climate change mitigation and adaptation. For example, a recent collection of case studies, edited by Böhm, Bharucha, and Pretty (2014), presents intentional and organic eco-communities ('ecocultures') from across the globe to showcase resilience in the face of extreme and changing weather patterns, human greed and exploitation, and natural disasters. Interestingly, almost every single case study references spirituality as one of the major factors in uniting communities and prompting them to action, often due to a deep-seated reverence toward nature (e.g. Böhm, Bharucha and Pretty 2014, 56, 131, 242-244).

Apart from small-scale initiatives, spiritual eco-communities of significant impact spring up all over

the world, maintaining pro-environmental values and practices more successfully than where spirituality is absent (Jackson 2009, 151). In a Christian context, eco-communalists tend to regard monastic communities as the early Christian model for ecospiritual formations (Dryzek 1997). Though not explicitly and primarily ecological in orthodoxy, the 'Benedictine order managed to create some remarkable sustainable agro-ecosystems in the vicinity of their monasteries. Later, the Franciscans would follow some of the environmental teachings of their founder, St Francis of Assisi' (Dryzek 1997, 163). Following the teachings of these and other Catholic orders about simplicity and frugality of life, the works of the Sisters of Earth as well as other monastic and non-monastic Catholic and ecumenical communities are described in John Carroll's book *Sustainability and Spirituality* (2004). Carroll gives a systematic appraisal of these communities, introducing some of them as outstanding exemplars of current North American sustainability endeavours. The basic tenet of these convents derives from a so-called creation ecology that regards nature as a representative of the Creator and one that is not independent of Him.

Outside Christianity, one of the most prominent spiritual-ecological networks is maintained by the Hare Krishnas who manage eco-farms and educational schemes all over the world. In Watford alone (United Kingdom), the community entertains 250,000 young and old people annually who visit to learn about nature-based alternatives to the growth-based and consumerist lifestyle practices of the outside world (Lestar 2018, 53). In an East European setting, the community runs an entire ecovillage in Hungary where disconnecting from technology and more sustainable land cultivation prove to serve the happiness of community members and visitors alike (Lestar 2018, 48). These are significant achievements, which, together with minor enterprises across the globe, offer multiple aspects of learning to students of system-wide sustainability transitions.

To date, the most significant attempt to frame religion within the sustainability transitions model has been presented by Koehrsen (2017). He discusses Western Christianity from the perspective of broad-scale institutional roles and public influences (e.g. historical revolutions and uprisings; penetration into the UN and the World Bank; the ecological encyclical of Pope Francis). Koehrsen (2017, 4) presents religious institutions as 'moral watchdogs' in the ecological debate, hence focusing on the

mezzo-level (regime) dynamics of the transitional model. Yet, as noted by Koehrsen (2017, 9) himself, such an approach involves the risk of homogenising religion. As various religions and their branches embrace diverse, and at times conflicting, logics and rhetoric in environmental discourse, we cannot expect them to assume a united role in combating ecological decay.

Although involving ‘materialisation’ in making transitions happen on the ground, the majority of Koehrsen’s (2017) framework is concerned with regime-level activities, such as education, campaigning, and dissemination. Religious communication and eloquence are no doubt important for sustainability transitions. As Koehrsen argues, religious rhetoric has already entered the realm of secular politics and policymaking, thus expanding religiosity into the wider social sphere (2017, 14). Yet, there is undoubtedly a need to study the grassroots practices of religious and spiritual communities in more detail so that we can understand the often messy and non-linear dynamics in sustainability practices on the ground. Indeed, Koehrsen identifies the ‘need for more qualitative in-depth approaches’ as ‘there are hardly any encompassing in-depth studies based on qualitative and/or mixed methods exploring’ the relationship between religion and ecology (2017, 6).

One of the merits of Koehrsen’s (2017) work is that he critically questions the understanding of religiosity being, by default, an enabling influence for pro-environmental attitude. The general claims concerning positive impacts need to be tested empirically, as Koehrsen repeatedly states. This involves, from our perspective, an empirical approach that engages with religious and spiritual communities. That is, rather than studying regime-level change attempts, it is important to understand the dynamics of spiritual practices in the ecological domain from the bottom-up, analysing their in-situ specificity. Let us now turn to an example of such empirical analysis.

### ***Spirituality and waste management: an example***

In a classic example of a sustainability transitions approach, Mohamad, Idris and Mamat – henceforth, Mohamad et al. – (2012) examine the role of religious communities in enhancing transition experiments. This study aims at revealing insights through the comparison of four religious cases opting into solid waste management programmes in Malaysia. The scheme offered recycling options

for the wider community at worship centres. In their awareness of the complexity and uncertainties of transitional processes, the authors set out to investigate the socioreligious layers of the programme. The study focused on why some spiritual initiatives were more successful than others, asking what attributes made members of one religious group achieve more results in waste management.

The charitable businesses built around the cases are considered to be crucial, in terms of persistence and success of the initiatives. As Mohamad et al. (2012) report, the most successful of these cases, the Tzu Chi Buddhist community, went further by integrating recycling into the spiritual lifestyle itself. That is, recycling became part of everyday life, being promoted by the Tzu Chi Grand Master, ‘who not only preaches recycling but who is also an exemplary recycling practitioner herself’:

Recycling work benefits society and oneself. After participating in collecting and sorting recyclables, many volunteers realize how arduous this work can be. As a result, they discipline themselves to adopt a thrifty lifestyle and do their best to appreciate the resources that they use. Through participating in recycling, many people at Tzu Chi recycling stations even rediscover lost happiness and health. We have seen numerous examples of people who were originally afflicted with depression or drug addiction cleansing away the garbage in their minds through the act of sorting through physical garbage. They find joy and strength to start life anew and bring happiness back to their families. (Cited in Mohamad, Idris and Mamat 2012, 245)

From the perspective of Mohamad et al. (2012), it is evident that it was the depth of the vision and the leader’s attitude towards recycling as part of spiritual growth that led to the steadfast spread of the Buddhist project at a pace and scale unknown in all other recycling initiatives in the country. Mohamad et al. (2012) argue that religious communities can be optimal niches for transition experiments, given their heterogeneity on the one hand (in terms of their age, education, and profession), and their shared belief on the other. All four religious recycling projects enjoyed the support of the mezzo-level regime as well as foreign aid and local NGOs. Interestingly, connections to these institutions were often secured through congregation members who worked for – or in some other way were related to – these external sponsors. The religious affiliation strengthened relations outside the established routines of the spiritual bond, which again made these niches especially effective for scaling up through networking activities.

In contrast to the popular conception of religious rigidity, Mohamad et al.’s (2012) research also reveals a readiness and flexibility in improving the scheme through learning how to advance the



project technologically but also how the programme could be adapted to the particular needs of the wider community. In concluding, the authors call for more empirical research that goes

beyond general idealism on the positive influence of religious ethics in inducing environmental practices, as emphasised in local literatures. [...] Indeed, both ethical and sociological explanations have to be combined to provide more concrete explanations on why religious ideals can be translated *into effective practices on the ground*. These sociological aspects could include their organizational and institutional structure, religious routines, leadership, membership, position in the broader community, etc. This is clearly apparent when the most successful case of the Tzu Chi Association is compared to the other cases. (Mohamad, Idris and Mamat 2012, 249; our emphasis)

The above-discussed article by Mohamad et al. (2012) gives us some insight into the uniqueness of how spiritual communities approach environmental behaviour change. To further make sense of these dynamics, one can draw on Latour (2005, 235), who has asked religious people why they do what they do, and Wenell (2016), a theorist of ethical consumption, who has inquired into why religious adherents might have more stimuli to act ethically than others. Wenell aims to understand why certain ethical consumers are using ‘supra-moral alternatives’ when making their shopping choices (2016, 34). The term ‘supra-moral’ refers to an attitude that goes beyond the limits of what is traditionally and conventionally expected, imposed, or recognised by society. Considering Latour’s concept of ‘plug-ins’ (Latour 2005, 209), which allow actors to make competent consumer choices, Wenell suggests that supra-moral alternatives of consumption may be more readily attainable to adherents of religion (2016, 34). In Latour’s theory, plug-ins serve as knowhow for making consumer choices (competence), resulting from prior learning or experience (e.g. if we buy this, we support a small farm, or this food contains something which is not good for my health). Within this frame, we can say that these plug-ins can be embedded spiritual teachings/beliefs that have resonance with followers, resulting in supra-moral and pro-environmental behaviour. For example, Hare Krishna believers will not consume animal flesh as a direct consequence of their ethical and spiritual standpoint on eating. Because of the broad versatility of plug-ins to draw upon (e.g. teachings, beliefs, emotions, experiences), religious practitioners may become special objects of research when consumer ethics is the aim of inquiry. Wenell (2016) draws attention to some of these plug-in effects, one of which is the spiritual teachings of Christianity or Buddhism. The story of the good Samaritan is one such example.

In that parable a Samaritan man, culturally regarded as an enemy to the Jews, helps a sick Jew lying on the roadside, thus disregarding the law of defilement (not to touch a potentially dead body). In this situated context, dominant cultural norms are overridden by spiritual conviction and motivation. This supra-moral act exemplifies how ethical consumption may overwrite dominant ways of praxis.

Although not explicated by Wenell, embracing the collective spirituality of a group through conversion is key towards an understanding of how supra-moral attitudes come to existence. That is, if the aim is to broaden the appeal, fellowship and involvement of an ecospiritual practice, then supra-moral plug-ins are a crucial aspect of how a collective identity is created, maintained, and extended. Conceptualising identity is an important factor in the literature of new social movements (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield 1994). Johnston argues that new social movements rise ‘in defence of identity’, especially for youth alienated from the ‘impoverishment of interaction in modern society’. Inasmuch as collective identities ‘have subcultural orientations that challenge the dominant system’ (Johnston 1994, 10), the detailed investigations of how they are obtained and maintained symbolically and organisationally promise to yield significant lessons for sustainability transitions scholars. Hence, from an ecological perspective, it is possible to perceive the conversion experience and its repeated narration (Rambo 1993, 137) as an additional motivator (plug-in) for practice which is not available to non-converts.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, we have problematised the conception of agency in the sustainability transitions literature. We have pointed out that it is treated rather statically by privileging technology without allowing enough room to locate social, and sometimes less visible, agential factors. In other words, as technology is often taking a prime position in sustainability transitions debates – which are generically studied from the perspective of structural global domains, such as energy, transport, agrifood, etc. – less space is dedicated to more detailed and ‘flat’, horizontal investigations (Geels 2011, 502).

Methodology is an important point to raise here. As sustainability transitions frameworks often focus on regimes, asking how niches can influence them, researchers’ attention is steered away from

questioning and exploring the nuanced and dynamic processes of practice. Here, we should particularly highlight the practices of communities, social movements, and other grassroots actors who play an important role in challenging orthodox regimes, creating niche innovations and resistance practices from below (Misoczky, Dornelas Camara and Böhm 2017). These grassroots movements are often not visible, as dominant discourses and media representations forget, ignore, or wilfully screen out practices that do not fit into the logic of dominant, technology-driven regimes and their representations, including dominant approaches to sustainability transitions.

In this article, we have argued that chief among the social factors that are of great importance when it comes to understanding ecological behaviour and transition towards a more sustainable world are spirituality and worldview in more general terms. Focusing on ecospirituality, we have discussed how people, often within spiritual communities and social movements, seek simplicity and frugality to transition towards a more sustainable future (e.g. Carroll 2004, 17, 95, 101, 109). Scholars of approaches such as new economics, stationary economics, degrowth and deep sustainability management increasingly recognise the value of such simplicity, coupled with intrinsic values such as a sense of belonging and affiliation, which are regarded as beneficial both to people and nature (Jackson 2009, 148).

We presented Koehrsen's (2017) nascent and initial theory in framing the role of religion (especially institutional actions and eloquence) within the sustainability transitions framework. We argued that, while religious greening, coalitions of awareness-raising and a 'proactive stance on climate change' (Koehrsen 2017, 2) are salient issues to address in the ecology and religion debate, their suitability to understanding sustainability transitions is debatable if they remain at the level of regime-centred rhetoric and communication. Thus, if the aim is to make transitions happen on the ground, they will need to be complemented by foregrounding empirical work and practice-based details.

The general claims concerning positive impacts need to be tested empirically, and hence we call for future sustainability transitions research to study ecospirituality from the perspective of the lived experience rather than at the regime level. That is, religious communities can be optimal niches for transition practices, given their heterogeneity on the one hand and their shared belief on the other

(Mohamad, Idris and Mamat 2012). As we have argued, what makes ecospiritual communities unique is their ability to unify and solidify ecological action, giving people what Latour (2005, 209) calls a 'plug-in' for making environmentally positive choices.

From this perspective, future research questions could be: How does change take place in ecospiritual communities, how is it maintained, and for how long? How are sustainable practices held together in their midst, and what difference does ecospirituality make in the process? What insights can be drawn from studying ecospiritual conversions? How do ecospiritual groups succeed to survive? How are they funded financially? What social and environmental benefits can be reached by cooperating with them, and what are the potential harms to be aware of? What are the transitional implications of studying simplicity, conviviality, sharing, and related themes from an ecospiritual perspective? As demand-side and other social factors are becoming increasingly important for the transitional field, these questions may provide a starting point for specifically studying the role of spirituality in transitioning towards a more sustainable world.

We argue that a shift of attention to social factors, such as spirituality, involves an increased recognition that incremental changes to business-as-usual will no longer do in the era of climate emergency.

By proposing that societal systems of provision be examined, redesigned and reconfigured in line with sustainable consumption goals, the New Economics proposes nothing less than a paradigm shift for the economy, or a wholesale transition in the presiding 'regime'. This implies that rather than making incremental changes, the model entails a widespread regime change for the economy and society, altering the rules of the game and the objective of economic development. (Seyfang 2009, 23)

In his influential book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, Schumacher (1973, 96) calls for a 'religious change' by which he proposes a 'new economics' that matters to people and ecology. He explicitly argues for a radical system change through what he elsewhere refers to as 'spirituality' in outlining his notion of meta-economics. Whether one is religiously or spiritually inclined or not, the call for simplicity and a new relation between nature and society is of more relevance today than ever before. As the success of the worldwide degrowth movement shows (e.g. D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2014), communities, organisations, corporations, and public institutions

increasingly realise that today's technology-driven economic growth mantra will not lead us out of the sustainability challenges faced on this planet.

We call on sustainability transitions scholars to take social dynamics, including ecospirituality, much more seriously. Studying social practices through the lived experience of practitioners will enrich the transitions agenda in more than one way. Not only may it help to understand how different worldviews relate to sustainable practices, but it may also uncover how and why specific beliefs and organisations support the ongoing maintenance of these practices. The social world is said to be a belief system (Žižek 2001, 15). It seems self-evident that to change this belief system requires us to understand and scrutinise it.

### **Notes on contributors**

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